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The Participation Forum[*]

November 1, 1995

Topic: What Can Change When We Listen Harder

Karl Schwartz, the team leader of the Country Experimental Lab (CEL) effort in Bangladesh that rethought the mission's democracy program, described how mission personnel set out to listen harder and what changed as a result. Using rapid appraisal methods, the mission's "D Team" went directly to the poor of Bangladesh to explore their democracy needs. The findings of the appraisal led to a redefinition of the democracy program, while the CEL experience led to broader participation by USAID and partners in program development. Anne Sweetser, AAAS fellow with the Participation Initiative, added some observations based on the three weeks she spent with the mission this past spring, training the "D Team" to listen with new ears, see with new eyes. Margaret Carpenter, Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East, introduced the session.

Applying Theories of Participation to Real Conditions

Margaret Carpenter

From my experience in Washington, being part of senior management and spending some time with our missions—admittedly on very brief visits—my conclusion is that USAID would be a much better place if all of us desk-bound bureaucrats in Washington would just be quiet and listen to people in the field. They are the ones who are really doing development: taking the theories of participation and reengineering and applying them to real people and real conditions in the field.   The experiment in Bangladesh has been very important for our bureau. We have all learned a lot from what they've gone through so far. The benefit of this kind of presentation is that it lays out the whole process and really gets us to think about how it changes people's attitudes over time. The heart of today's discussion is to look at how the Bangladesh experience could be used in other situations.

The Democracy Needs of USAID/Bangladesh's Customers

Karl Schwartz

The Bangladesh mission acquired its experience with participation as a Country Experimental Laboratory for program design and implementation. This meant we went back to ground zero in terms of our design practices and built an alternate approach based on the core values of customer focus, diversity, empowerment, teamwork, managing for results, and accountability. We then tested this alternative approach by designing a new democracy program. The model was tested on democracy because this was the next design activity out of our chute.

During the design process, we formed a partnership with two organizations that will carry through implementation, The Asia Foundation and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC).

The bottom-line result is that the alternate approach increased participation and reduced design time by about 75 percent. As many as 40 people participated directly in the design process, not counting the approximately 500 customers from whom we gathered information, yet we went from initial design concepts to implementation in about five and a half months.

A Quick Walk through the Model

The model comprises nine steps.

STRATEGIC PHASE

1. *Empower the core strategic team.* The team has delegated authority to approve and sign implementation orders necessary to achieve the desired results.

2. *Detect the needs of the ultimate customers.* The customers are contacted directly and asked about their needs.

3. *Select partners and incorporate them into the core strategic team.* The process includes establishing selection criteria, soliciting concept papers, and negotiating and signing a Development Agreement outlining operational relationships and working procedures for strategic planning.

4. *Develop strategic plan.* Using results of the rapid appraisal of customer needs, the core strategic team establishes strategic objectives, program outcomes, and performance indicators and estimates resource requirements.

5. *Validate desired results and program outcomes.* The core strategic team goes back to the customers to validate the strategic plan.

6. *Obligate funds at the strategic objective level.*

TACTICAL PHASE

7. *Form a tactical team with partners to develop activities packages and customer service plans.* The customer service plans identify the customers and standards for serving them, describe the services

to be provided, and explain how needs were identified and how customers will be involved in evaluation.

8. *Develop a customer service plan for interacting with partners.* (Plan is similar to plan in Step 7.)

9. *Negotiate an implementation amendment to the development agreement signed in Step 3.* The amendment incorporates specific activities and customer service plans.

The model is simple because it is carried out by an empowered multifunctional team; that is, a team which has all the skills it needs to complete its work without external reviews, clearances, or approvals. This is reflected in Step 1.

It's a customer-focused model in that it starts with our customers' perceptions and assessments of their relationship with the democratic institutions and practices of Bangladesh. That's reflected in Step 2.

The model also validates planned results with customers; that is, it asks them if the strategic objectives and program outcomes are desirable and feasible and involves them in monitoring results. This is reflected in Steps 5 and 9.

The model involves our partners in the definition of strategic objectives and program outcomes, and USAID staff in the preparation of activities packages. In short, strategic and operational planning become shared rather than divisible tasks. This is reflected in Steps 3, 4, 7, and 8.

We found that the model can be further simplified. In practice, Steps 4, 5, 7, and 8 tended to merge, so that we actually ended up with a six-step model. There were three reasons for this. First, we began to worry that we would not finish on schedule if we dealt with these steps separately. Second, as we built team skills and confidence, we became more adept at using work groups and consultation. The team found it was able to work on several tasks simultaneously while keeping everyone fully informed and involved in decisions. Third, a natural dialectic developed between our strategic and tactical work. There is little value to be gained by separating what we wanted to accomplish from how we were going to accomplish it, because the two informed each other.

We believe this model is transferable to other sectors. We are using it now to develop new programs in family planning, health, and economic growth.

Increasing USAID's Participation

In this new model, participation by USAID staff increased because design decisions were shifted from management to the staff through the use of an empowered multifunctional team. Also, the use of rapid-appraisal techniques to gather customer information increased the mission's reliance on Bangladeshi staff, involved more of them in the design effort, and deepened their participation in its substantive and analytical aspects.

Mission management was able to step back from the review-approval process, because management set the team's membership, its mandate, the criteria for judging the team's work products, and the out-of-bounds conditions; that is, the issues over which management and the team would consult. In selecting the team's membership, management was careful to ensure that all the skills necessary for the team to complete its work without outside reviews were represented.

Management agreed to judge the team's work in terms of its fit with the agency's democracy strategy and implementation guidelines and the customer needs as identified by the team. For its part, the team agreed to consult with management over potential or actual violations of acquisition regulations, work delays and the reasons for them, substantial revisions to the experimental design model, breakdowns in the team process, including relationships with the partners, and results of the

customer-needs identification-and-verification work. The team also agreed to document its decisions so that management could track the team's work on a timely basis. This was done by creating electronic documents accessible to all mission staff.

Public sessions were held at critical points in the process, at the detect-needs and validation stages, for example. Everybody in the embassy was invited to those sessions.

Mission management honored its commitment to empowerment and neverattempted to judge the team's work on any but the agreed criteria. This increased the team members' level of involvement, ownership, and commitment, and made them willing to accept accountability. Team morale remained high throughout this process.

Customer Involvement and USAID Participation

In the new approach, customer involvement was linked to increased USAID participation. We accepted agency guidance and defined our customers as the socially and economically disadvantaged. We then began to think about how we might best establish and maintain direct links with our customers. At this point, Anne Sweetser gave us a quick course on rapid appraisal. We had never used rapid appraisal techniques in the mission and had to develop the active listening skills necessary to use it successfully. This we did with Anne's help.

Her training also helped us realize that our design should begin with our customers' perceptions and assessments of their relationship with democratic institutions and practices. To develop this information, we fielded a detect-needs troop of 20 Bangladeshi staffers, 11 men and 9 women. Members of the troop were recruited from all mission offices, because the democracy team was not large enough to accomplish this task on its own.

The fieldwork was conducted in three rounds of one week each. During each round, four teams, each comprised of two men and two women, traveled to different areas of the country to conduct interviews. Both group and individual interviews were held. Men interviewed men and women interviewed women. We estimate our interviews covered 500 customers. Our sample was purposive in that we tried to capture gender, age, occupational, ethnic, religious, and regional differences among our customers.

The field teams used open-ended topic guidelines for their discussions rather than specific questions such as might be found in market research or public opinion polls. The topical guidelines were developed by the interviewers as they practiced their active-listening skills and thought about democracy in Bangladesh.

Our methodology explicitly called for the interviewers to record their interviews and distill significant findings at the end of each day in the field. At the end of each week, the findings of each field team were shared and discussed with other teams.

Based on these discussions and field notes, Rosalie Fanale, a member of the democracy team, prepared a weekly synopsis of our customers' views, which was reviewed and updated by the field teams following their return to Dhaka. This allowed us to complete our customer-needs report while the information and findings were still fresh in the minds of the interviewers.

We used the same basic approach at Step 5 to validate our strategic objectives and program outcomes. At that point, however, we focused on whether our customers thought the objectives and outcomes were desirable and feasible. We will use this approach again on an annual basis for program monitoring and assessment.

The combination of active listening to our customers and analyzing what we heard increased the number of USAID staff involved in the design effort and deepened their participation in its substantive aspects as well.

The detect-needs troop found that even though our customers are poor and most are illiterate, they have a fairly sophisticated understanding of how the democratic institutions and practices of Bangladesh can work against their economic interests. As a result, we have moved our new activities packages downstream, closer to the lives of our customers, to address the democracy needs important to them. Our program now emphasizes local elected bodies rather than the national parliament, and seeks to increase the number of women elected to local bodies and to expand the capacity of local associations to advocate on behalf of our customers. We have also given increased emphasis to enhancing alternate dispute resolution mechanisms at the local level.

The model's reliance on rapid appraisal raises a number of issues. First is cost. Each complete cycle costs an estimated $25,000 for per diem and travel. We hope we will be able to continue to afford the costs of rapid appraisals.

The second is the difficulty of adhering to the rapid appraisal methodology. Public opinion polls or market research surveys and their quantifiable findings are more familiar. The iterative process whereby the interviewers build their understanding of our customers' relational world tends to be abbreviated because it is seen as too time consuming.

Finally, there is a tendency among the educated to restate or redefine the stated needs of the less educated. This tendency was the topic of many discussions as we struggled to stay as close as we could to the relational world of our customers. For example, one of the partners argued that it would not have undertaken a successful rural sanitation program if it had listened only to its customers, because none of them requested latrines. Further discussions made clear, however, that the customers had identified poor health as a problem.

The task of the team in such an instance is not to restate the customers' needs, but to identify activities which address the needs in the way that sanitary latrines contribute to improved health. The role of analysis in designing programs is to apply the partners' knowledge about such things as germs and disease vectors to meeting our customers' stated needs.

Establishing Effective Partnerships

Our goal was to select and involve our partners as early and as extensively as possible but in a manner consistent with acquisition regulations and our desire to maintain direct contacts with our customers. We did not want to become dependent upon our partners for customer information, nor did we want them to become simple intermediaries implementing a program we designed.

At first we thought these conditions meant we had to define what we wanted to procure by establishing strategic objectives and program outcomes before we could involve our partners. This would have prevented them from getting involved until about Step 7. So we decided to build our model on *Handbook 13* guidance for assistance agreements, which allowed us to involve partners fully in the design process.

Although these actions converted what had always been a judging relationship into a partnership, we did nothing fancy; we simply issued a request for applications. And we selected our partners from those applications on a competitive basis. Because we were selecting partners rather than service providers, the evaluation criteria may have been a bit unique. They emphasized compatibility between the applicant's and USAID's core values, the applicant's ability to involve and support diverse partner organizations so that participation could be further extended, and the applicant's commitment to the proposed approach.

Our partnership experience taught us that effective partnerships can take many forms. Our partnership is a joint venture rather than a team. This mode was preferred because each partner was able to retain its institutional identity while working towards a common goal, whereas in a team the

partners merge their identities. Defining the precise nature of the partnership must be left to the partners themselves, and USAID guidance on this issue should be as flexible as possible.

We also learned that, given the variable nature of partnerships, it is critically important that the partners clarify their expectations and define the nature of their relationship early on. There is a tendency, however, to want to get on with the work at hand and to allow relationships to emerge as the work proceeds. While it's possible to delay these clarifying discussions, the downstream risks are substantial: misunderstandings, a lack of mutual trust, and, eventually, collapse of the partnership.

We found out that our partners need to have a level of empowerment within their own organizations equivalent to that of USAID. This balances the relationship, makes it easier to reach consensus, and allows the partnership to complete its work without outside reviews and approvals.Finally, the partners need to give attention early to sorting out roles within the partnership. Critical roles include leaders, facilitators, process monitors, members, recorders. These roles can be shared in a variety of ways, but they are critical to the efficiency of the partnership and to promoting its health.

To See and Hear with New Eyes and Ears

Anne Sweetser

I am committed to an anthropological approach to research that fits with the notion of a learning organization, the heart of reengineering. The opportunity to work with the Bangladesh mission last spring meant that I could bring my experience in social anthropology into the changing USAID. I believe it was a good match.

Discovering the Unexpected

The greatest successes in research come not when researchers find what they expect, but when they find something that they *do not* expect. When they notice something that doesn't fit, something that is "wrong" or discordant, they begin to learn. This open, creative notion of research contrasts with research conceived as verification of pre-set hypotheses about relationships among dependent and independent variables structured into rigid questionnaires. It avoids predetermining which topics are relevant and avoids preselecting a sample of a particular size and constitution.

Customer surveying under reengineering is a way to seek definitions of issues or problems as perceived by USAID's ultimate customers. Researchers have to be willing to admit that they arenot sure even what the right questions are. They have to ask themselves, "How can I go about finding out what I am now unaware that I do not know?" This is the only honest starting point in a cross-cultural research endeavor. But it's not easy; it's a real skill. It requires a very special sort of courage, and also a particular sort of consciousness. It's extremely simple and extremely difficult at the same time.

People conducting this kind of research have to be conscious of the fact that their own culture both allows them to understand and gets in the way of their ability to understand. To the extent that their culture works for them in their own society, allowing them to send out and read signals, both nonverbal and verbal, it allows them to function as human beings and to be competent adults. And the more competent they are, the more pride they take in that competence, the more attached, both emotionally and intellectually, they are to viewing the world through that set of precepts. And this is

especially true for people who have become experts in something. Professional training allows them to adopt a particular vocabulary and set of concepts, to develop competence using these, and be rewarded by others for their expertise. The more expert they are, as members of their own culture or of a profession, the more their skills may prejudice their ability to be truly open to other frameworks of understanding, experiencing, and expressing reality.

The courage that is required is the courage to recognize and acknowledge one's own cultural biases. This is what social anthropologists do when they conduct participant-observation research over an extended period of time. Such research involves a lot of stumbling, mistaken assumptions, embarrassment, and a growing tolerance for discomfort, because it facilitates learning in unanticipated ways.

Essentially what the observers/researchers need to cultivate is an ability to look and listen as if they have never looked and listened before; they need to shed the eyeglasses of their own culture. The ability to deliberately stop the natural tendency to jump to conclusions about what is heard and seen is the key to successful rapid-appraisal work. It allows one to notice what is unexpected or different.

Training the Detect-Needs Troop

I arrived in Bangladesh immediately after Camille Barnett of Research Triangle Institute (RTI) had worked with the democracy team and the detect-needs troop. Their strong motivation to work as a team facilitated what I wished to communicate.

In the rapid appraisal the troop worked on sample interviews in the morning and spent the remainder of the day discussing them, reinforcing the willingness of each person to see things differently, to discuss those differences, and to clarify the things that did not fit with what they expected. Thus the troop was able, in a matter of three weeks, to begin to see how the ultimate customers in Bangladesh understand democracy. The troop would not have been able to reach this understanding if they had relied upon their own cultural expertise at responding to what people say and putting what they heard into their own framework of interpretation as members of that culture.

Bangladesh is a very hierarchical society. Therefore, it was important to try to get the members of the troop past the idea that their special education meant that they could understand the issues better. I believe that the troop was successful in ferreting out ideas and frameworks of understanding that poor people in rural Bangladesh hold about democracy
because the members of the troop were willing to try to learn in a new way, to become a learning group, part of a learning organization.

Discussion Session

Gender Aspects of Rapid Appraisal

Bill Alli (Management Planning): Did the religious context in Bangladesh where women are treated as second-class citizens complicate the attempt to move towards participation in democracy?
Schwartz: I have spent half my adult life in Islamic cultures in various parts of the world. They're all very different. They also change. Through our democracy detect-needs work, we found that men in Bangladesh thought local elected bodies would be more responsive to the needs of the poor if there were more women elected to those bodies, and they would be happy to vote for women to sit on those bodies. The culture of Bangladesh is opening up to increased women's participation in the political system, certainly at the local level. The national level is a bit more difficult because of the constraints on women in terms of travel and campaigning.

I think USAID has a very good opportunity here to increase women's participation, because it's something men in the society see as helpful to them.

Sweetser: Were you to ask Muslims whom I know from several years of living in Pakistan about the position of women, they would say they're absolutely equal in Islam. They hear a question referring to a broad range of family, economic, and political issues exclusively in terms of religious ideology; they appear to be insensitive to a distinction between ideal and real. But Islam places responsibility for the treatment of women in society on men. Thus, where democracy refers to justice as well as to governance, there is in Islamic ideology—which, as I have just said, is the habitual frame through which Muslims think about social issues—the basis for an argument favoring men's active support of women's search for equal treatment under the law.

The Use of Questions in Rapid Appraisals

Elise Stork: Your handouts list some of the questions which are used for the rapid appraisals. Could there be a dichotomy between the open-ended questions and the iterative processes? Does constantly massaging and reconsidering the findings on a weekly basis drive you into more specific questions? Might you begin to predetermine outcomes based on what you think you're getting?

Schwartz: We used the discussions to identify areas that required further exploration. When we saw or found something that we didn't expect to at all we had to go back and get more information on it. But we tried to go back with generic topics rather than a specific question to which people would say yes or no.

Sweetser: We developed a set of themes and sub-themes to which team members could refer while they were carrying on *conversations* with people in the field. These themes were generated through discussions among members of the team; this process simultaneously helped them clarify their own presuppositions or prejudices. Later they reviewed the themes and were free to revise them as a group if their learning to that point led them to recommend improvements. No attempt was made to ask each person a specific set of questions.

Procurement Issues

Adele Liskov: With the increasing push to involve more partners in the design, what advice would you give on how to avoid running afoul of competition?

Schwartz: The reason we went to *Handbook 13* assistance instruments is that they don't have the same procurement restrictions as a contract does. We did everything very much like a contract procurement. So we issued an RFA, we established evaluation criteria in the RFA, we had a technical review of the applications as they came in and assigned points to the criteria, we held follow-up discussions with each of the applicants as we looked at their proposals, and so on and so forth.

So it all went fairly smoothly and we stayed very close to what people recognize as an open and fair competition.

La Voy: A document put out by the Office of Procurement jointly with General Counsel in August might be helpful. It is a readable, short piece on guidance for consultation to avoid conflict of interest or problems with the "Sunshine Act." (General Notice 8/17/1995)

Rapid Appraisal Process: An Aspect of Democracy

Jay Nussbaum: Karl scared me by saying it took $25,000 of scarce OE money for each three-week rapid appraisal cycle.

Why does it have to be OE? As you've talked, it's become apparent that the most valuable thing you've accomplished so far are these surveys.

What is democracy? It is very hard to define, but one of its attributes probably is communication between the governed and the governors. Information generated by a rapid appraisal can be valuable to the governors. Even in dictatorships, the governors still want to do good for the governed.

The rapid appraisals are not just analysis, not just part of finding out what the problem is. I'd try to find a way to make them part of the solution.

Johnson: What we do in USAID obviously is a small piece of the overall picture of what happens in development. In most countries the biggest part of that picture is what the country itself does with its development budget. Do you think, based on your experience to date, that the donor community should look into transferring some of these new ways of doing business to countries? The Canadians and now USAID and many other donors have tried to reinvent the way they do business, but I don't know to what extent there's been an attempt to transfer this new way of thinking to the countries themselves.

Schwartz: One of our program outcomes relates to trying to get local elected bodies to accept and follow best practices. At that level, we're doing what might be seen as a version of reengineering.

At the national level, the government and the donors have been talking about improving the efficiency and the effectiveness of civil service (what today is called reengineering). The political situation is such that there has not been any progress on that since I've been in Bangladesh, and there probably will not be any in the immediate future, but the idea is always there. We've been asked to send people from Bangladesh to the United States so they could meet with the vice president and talk about reengineering. We haven't been too enthusiastic about it because we don't see any commitment on their part to really change.

BRAC has reengineered as much as USAID has, and The Asia Foundation was only a little bit behind BRAC and USAID on that issue.

Validity of Rapid Appraisal Results

Curt Grimm: In a country the size of Bangladesh, 500 people—the number you say you reached—is statistically fairly unimportant. Also, concerning the selection of partners, there are lots of representative groups that could be interested. How did you get input from interest groups that exist in Bangladeshi society and how did you feed that input into the process of selecting partners?

Sweetser: On the issue of statistical significance, if you look in a statistics book, you'll find that statistical validity depends, first of all, on being sure that the answers that you're getting correspond with what you think you are asking. And until you have done the type of research that I'm suggesting, this very open, qualitative work in a rapid appraisal, I'm not sure that you can assert that a sample is or is not going to give you statistical validity, precisely because of that problem. I mean, you're not sure you're asking the right questions until you've done some much more open work.

Schwartz: We don't think there are a lot of other opinions out there among our customers that we did not encounter. We think we have an accurate sense of our customers' thoughts. We validated that in Step 5: after we had identified strategic objectives and program outcomes, we went back to our customers and asked them specifically if the plans were desirable and feasible. That is not a statistical check, but it is a validation.

Bangladesh is about 120 million people. A statistically valid sample of that population is about 1,000 to 1,100 people. However, our goal was not to reach a statistically valid sample of the entire population as in public opinion polling, but to talk to enough of our customers to ensure we understood their relational world; to develop an insider's perspective on our customers' understanding of their interactions with the country political institutions. The test, therefore, is not one of statistical

validity, but whether through the iterative process of rapid appraisal there are no more surprises or unexpected findings. We think our detect-needs and validation efforts meet this latter test.

To address the second part of your question, we're aware that other groups have an interest in democracy in Bangladesh. But we were focused on our customers, and we wanted to know what we could do to work with them and to help them. The stakeholders have a very different agenda than our customers, and to a great extent it is the stakeholders' behaviors that we're trying to change. One has to be careful not to allow intermediaries and interest groups to set the agenda of the program.

Effect on the USAID Mission Staff

John Grant: As we know, consultation sometimes can be a little messy and time-consuming. Sometimes it can be a little unsettling and frustrating to change plans and strategies that were set. Was this process frustrating for the staff in the mission, or was it universally energizing and empowering? Did some people have difficulty taking off their cultural lenses to hear what people were saying?

Schwartz: The final reaction is very positive. In fact, the mission has made a decision to go ahead and reorganize itself on the concept of empowered multifunctional teams and move away from offices. But it is also true that some people had a hard time taking off their hats. Some never succeeded. As we did fieldwork, some people found it difficult to give up the fact that they had a degree and they were talking to people who didn't have degrees.

The biggest difference, though, was in the role that women and support staff played in Bangladesh. Some of our secretaries have bachelor's degrees and master's degrees in sociology, in psychology, in political science—skills that were kind of buried. On the detect-needs troop these people just blossomed. We figured out that we ought to be using these people in a more substantive way. So the democracy team now has two people who we thought of only as secretaries before but who had a lot of interesting things to say. In Bangladesh, women still need to talk to women.

Overall, the experience maintained mission morale through the difficulties of reengineering and what was happening to the agency as a whole. We didn't just hear about reengineering; we did it. We saw it made a difference. We discovered that it is possible to involve people in a very positive way.

Arthur Silver: Is there anything that you noted or observed about this experimental process that might have been due to the fact of its being an experiment and under observation?

Schwartz: We operated on a voluntary basis. We sought volunteers for two teams: one developed the design approach, and the other implemented it. Not everybody volunteered. We sought volunteers for the detect-needs work as well. Not everybody volunteered initially. In fact, some people thought it was a waste of time, that reengineering was a silly fad that would go away eventually or that it was different only in name from what we've always done.

As we moved forward and began giving out our reports, the morale in the exploration team, as we called the first group, stayed high, in fact, it soared well above other committees. More and more people volunteered and eventually we had to limit participation in the detect-needs troop.

I'm not sure anybody in Washington was really watching us very closely. But the enthusiasm the experience generated within the mission influenced people in the mission to think more positively. A lot of the concerns were whether teams could be effective and what individual roles on the team would be. We discussed these questions extensively.

Possible Role for Intermediaries

John Anderson: In the selection of partners to work with, is it possible, or even perhaps desirable, to completely avoid intermediaries—groups that represent some interest—in the selection of partners? Do we really want to bring in partners with no script, with no ideas, without an agenda? Don't we want to

find partners that are very much advocates for an approach of one kind or another, particularly when we're talking democracy?

Schwartz: A distinction must be maintained between interest groups in the political sense, who are trying to affect public policy, and stakeholders and other groups that might contribute to the program. I think you're using the term "interest groups" in the latter sense. We are going to involve more of those. What we have are prime partners, and we expect sub-partners to emerge from this relationship. Under the umbrella of the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh, we held an open workshop on the approach last month for all NGOs in Bangladesh that might be interested in working on one of our five program outcomes. That was followed up by separate meetings in greater detail on each program outcome. The NGOs who participated now should be in the process of deciding if they want to participate and preparing their proposals. After another month or so, we will have a number of sub-grants working on the five program outcomes.

Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation

Carpenter: You said at one point that you wouldn't know for up to seven years whether or not you took the right path. I would certainly hope that we would find ways, and I assume you have thought about this, to integrate participatory methods all the way along, not just in the very beginning, so that there is an ongoing rolling assessment of effectiveness enabling us to make course corrections along the way. Could you comment on how your thinking about participatory project design has affected your thinking about monitoring and evaluation?

Schwartz: Our approach includes a monitoring and evaluation plan. We will use the same rapid appraisal approach to gathering qualitative information about people's thoughts on the indicators and benchmarks. We report to Washington on results, request more resources on the basis of those results, and adjust activities as we go along.

Communications from the E-Mail Bag

My thanks go to all the contributors to this Forum's overflowing E-mail bag, most of whose communications had to be shortened drastically in the interests of space. — Diane La Voy

Listening to Whom?

Curt Grimm: "I don't agree with Karl Swartz that the ultimate customers and a USAID mission staff alone are all that are needed to design and implement a democracy/governance activity. It takes a very broad variety of different kinds of individuals and organizations—even some driven by a very strong, one-sided agenda—to identify all the constraints that exist and know how to successfully implement an effective program in a given country context."

Diane La Voy: "Knowing the perspectives of the range of potential partners and other citizen groups is part of understanding the lay of the land. I don't know whether that was neglected in Bangladesh. But I do welcome the mission's fulsome focus on ultimate customers, not only because that is too often given short shrift, but because a grounding in the customers' priorities and perspectives is necessary for the mission or any external player in assessing and interpreting the approaches of the various NGOs and interest groups."

Max Goldensohn (Development Associates, Inc.): "Are there any arguments in favor of limiting participation? Time pressures have been mentioned once or twice and dismissed. But what about local politics and interests which may warp the participatory process?

"After 25 years in the field, I believe strongly in the participative approach and in process-centered development. But I have also seen cases where local interests conflicted dramatically with national or global interests. How do you solve these problems?"

Ramón Daubon: "I can see where a local viewpoint represented by citizens and government at that level could be contested by an outside actor who professes a broader view. But—alerta!—who or what legitimizes these outside actors? They could be powerful corporations representing only themselves but speaking out for all sorts of noble ideals, or "experts" of sundry sorts speaking out to save humanity, or a national government that professes to speak for the good of the whole country. All of this rests on the assumptions that local interests are unable to see beyond their own selfish interests. And while there is a lot of truth to this concern, it is no greater than the self-interests of the corporations, the "experts," or even the national government. Given the choice of risks, I'll side with the citizens, who I believe are quite capable of looking at the broad interest. And if we feel that their judgement is not quite up to it, then let's educate their judgement (to paraphrase Jefferson), but let's keep the authority with them, where it belongs."

Mari Clark: "A point to be stressed is that the team in Bangladesh took care to ensure that the voices and concerns of women as well as men were heard."

Rapid Appraisal: Quick? Dirty?

Timm Harris: "Use of rapid rural appraisal (RRA) as a quick and sometimes dirty method of getting people's views and opinions is extremely effective in certain cases. In the Bangladeshi case it was effective in saving calendar time in the design process and incorporated more people than normal. In that particular case it worked well. However, it is extremely dangerous to assume that this could be a universally applicable model, since design requirements can vary so greatly. There are many instances where RRA may not be an appropriate method for gathering information and perspectives, where too many voices may blur focus and actually lengthen design time, where 20 staffers are not available for three weeks each."

Anne Sweetser: "Re: RA as quick and dirty. Alas, this is what is so often done under the name of this method—it ends up being a hybrid, sort of a short-cut (probably nonrepresentative?) survey. In truth, the method, when properly executed, is anything but quick and dirty. It is a truly qualitative method, a variation on participant observation of social anthropology in which questions are clarified and new dimensions brought to the fore."

Sharon Epstein: "Rapid Rural Appraisal is not new in USAID and it is one of a number of useful devices for gathering and testing information and opinions. However, in my experience, its utility can also be severely limited if people who participate don't have a solid grounding in the subject matter of the exercise and in the history of the program, as well as prior experience doing fieldwork. The wrong conclusions could easily be drawn from RRAs.

"Second, I think it is premature to conclude that as a result of the exercise in Bangladesh, the program will be any more effective or have any greater impact than the program under the 'old' programming system. The period of time to produce a program may indeed be shortened and I would like to say that this is an unqualified 'good thing' in USAID, because it takes too long from program idea to implementation, but the quality of the product may be negatively affected by shortening the period too. In the case of the program in Bangladesh, that remains to be assessed over time.

"Third, for some time I have been concerned that there is an inherent bias against knowledge and experience of technical staff (who, in USAID, also possess considerable project design/implementation skills and experience) in the discussions of empowering teams. It is fun to participate in some teams and to do RRA on some subjects, particularly at the mission/country level. In the process, a person can learn about development issues he or she has had little prior exposure to. However, it is also possible for people who know little or nothing about the subject to come back from team/RRA exercises with entirely facile, even goofy, notions of what should be designed and implemented.

"I hope that in the enthusiasm for empowerment, we retain a healthy respect for the specialized knowledge of USAID technical staff. Everyone's opinion in a team, in my humble opinion, is not equal."

Diane LaVoy: "You raise good cautions all-around: we need to strengthen and make better use of our technical expertise, not appear to have found a quick-fix alternative to it. The mark of a real development professional, in my estimation, is someone who can BOTH set aside her expertise (in order to 'listen with new ears, see with new eyes' the customers' worlds), AS WELL AS apply that expertise effectively, engaging the customers, in solving problems and changing their circumstances."

Bobby Herman: "I especially liked Anne's use of the word "courage" to describe the process of asking what one doesn't know. I also believe that becoming a better listener requires a capacity for empathy."

Sher Plunkett (from an off-the-cuff response to a query from a mission about how to include large numbers of FSN in a customer appraisal process): "I think that to continue to develop depth of experience, it is good to have a core group—maybe only one or two people—to follow through the whole RA exercise and be responsible for the results, and to document the process. However, those who are not able to spend full time doing RAs could do desk work such as examining village studies or local newspaper articles, etc., on the topic, or key informant interviews, that would round out and triangulate the RA data. RA is really only one leg of the stool."

Listening to Customers in Nigeria, Bolivia, Egypt, Yemen, and Panama

Stella Goings: Nigeria. "Participation is a key element of the USAID-Nigeria Implementation Strategy. We convened a Listener's Conference several months ago. We believe the approach was novel and, from our perspective, the results were well worth the effort. A few excerpts from the report on this conference follow."

The meeting brought together middle-level spokespersons from nongovernmental organizations in northern Nigeria, U.S. implementing partners (mainly U.S. cooperating agencies) and USAID staff. Decisions about the agenda and the presentations at the meeting were made by the northern NGO representatives. USAID and its IPS were required to 'listen' rather than 'talk.' This forum gave northerners the opportunity to

fully express their views about the development needs of their communities as well as their concerns and apprehensions. The group members offered their assessment of opportunities for donor-assisted development efforts in the north and candidly appraised the potential obstacles and constraints to USAID programs.

Michael Yates and Olivier Carduner: Bolivia. "The Bolivia mission is working closely with the local Izoceño Guarani Indian Federation (CABI) to develop a new wildlife management program in the Chaco to help meet our Environment Strategic Objective. We've learned A LOT by listening closely to these customers, including the following:

1. The Izoceños have a long tradition of indigenous conservation awareness and action, and have used their cohesive social organization to regulate hunting and fishing in selected areas. We will use this indigenous base to guide further program development.

2. The traditional healers ('Ipayos') play an important role in teaching respect for the environment, and in particular the need for a balance between plants, animals, and Izoceños—if all are to survive. They can become leaders in raising awareness about biodiversity conservation, and the mission will incorporate the Ipayos in program design and implementation. This was clearly something we had never considered.

3. Izoceño 'leaders' are more intermediaries for their communities than real decision-makers, and we learned that these leaders will not make decisions on behalf of their communities without returning to those communities for in-depth consultation. While this takes some time it also assures strong community participation and support, and should be strongly endorsed.

4. The Izoceños feel VERY strongly that they (rather than the GOB or an NGO) should be in charge of resource conservation in this area, and of the possible wildlife management program with USAID. This has played a key role in internal mission discussions/debate of how to structure this activity.

"Given the difficult institutional capability requirements for prospective grantees, the mission decided to begin its collaborative relationship with the Izoceños by using a purchase order. The deliverable will be an Izoceño outline of a proposed wildlife management program, and one that already incorporates consultation with the 21 Izoceño communities; with this USAID reiterates once again its firm intention to design a program targeted to Izoceño needs and capabilities. Nevertheless, the need to rely on a purchase order (rather than beginning with what many felt was a preferred option, a small grant) highlights the potential conflicts between reengineering's emphasis on working with the customers and existing federal procurement regulations."

Duncan Miller: Egypt. "We are still going strong with our USAID/Cairo Participation Forum and much appreciate the inputs from you all. As a part of our mission strategy planning, our Forum provided assistance to Strategic Objective team efforts at customer service planning and later for the Mission Customer Service Plan (CSP). Although frustration abounds in many areas, the CSP has become a very useful tool for us to get participation out of the conference rooms and into the field."

Joyce Davidson: Yemen. "We will be doing a WID Assessment soon here in Yemen, and it is obvious that this customer-focused approach is the way we need to do it. I look forward to hearing more about the experimental labs!"

David Mutchler: Panama. "USAID is working through NGOs with impoverished communities in the Panama Canal Watershed to help them develop rapid appraisals of community assets and priority needs and then to develop a community strategy for acquiring the outside resources they need to carry out a development plan.

"USAID/Panama has held focus groups with over forty of Panama's newly elected mayors to access their vision of community needs throughout the country. We are now helping the mayors conduct focus groups of their own with their constituents, teaching them to listen to the community. Solid waste management has emerged as a priority problem of all municipalities, rural as well as urban.

"The communities present proposals for small-scale community potable water systems, footbridges, one-room schools, etc. USAID selects those proposals which will benefit the most needy communities. USAID supplies the building materials, government agencies supply the technical assistance, and the communities themselves do all the construction work. The result is extremely high community satisfaction and pride in the completed project, and meticulous community maintenance of the infrastructure."

Diane LaVoy: "There are a couple of points I would like to highlight. One is the obvious but very important one: there's nothing more energized and sustainable than an effort that people have, themselves, determined to undertake. The other point that interests me is your work to enable mayors to listen to their own constituencies. There is also some very promising work being done in this field, with support from the Environmental Health Project, in the Middle East/North Africa."